

HR Corner

Pragmatism produces extra flavour

by Charles Mak



Johnny Chan (right),
assistant director
Kathy Hon, assistant
training manager
The Spaghetti House
Restaurants Limited
Photo: Johnny Kwok

Staff training essential in every aspect

Faced with increasingly fierce competition, service-oriented industries across Hong Kong no longer consider training a mere tool for staff development. Johnny Chan, assistant director, The Spaghetti House Restaurants Limited, confirms this.

"Excellent service cannot manifest itself. Only through our people can customers enjoy such service and the quality food we have to offer," Mr Chan says. "In view of this, our staff remain central in every aspect of our operations."

To maintain a high and consistent level of service, the Spaghetti House starts every new recruit with a day-long familiarisation programme in which the company's culture, infrastructure, business philosophy and operation standards are explained. "Service alignment must begin on day one," Mr Chan adds.

Hands-on approach

The Spaghetti House makes it a company policy for senior staff to lead junior employees. Experienced staff are nominated to become trainers who undergo a specially designed "train the trainers" programme. In line with this, the bulk of the staff training programmes are conducted with a hands-on approach. Mr Chan notes the aims are to equip new recruits with the requisite soft and hard skills and to foster the right attitude towards the industry as a whole. "This also cultivates relationships between staff on different levels of seniority," he adds.

For example, head chefs instruct new kitchen staff on food preparation and health and hygiene standards, and assign them to workstations where they work under the guidance of a senior chef. Although frontline staff receive on-the-job training in a similar fashion, they are required to undergo supplementary training in a classroom setting.

To cater to the learning needs of a young and energetic workforce, interactive activities such as role-play and video exercises are incorporated. "Staff see themselves in action and obtain immediate feedback from trainers and peers. Good behaviour is praised and learnt while less desirable action can be rectified," Mr Chan says.

Other practical programmes such as presentation skills and EQ training plus sharing sessions and management briefings are also regular features on the training menu.

House special

The Spaghetti House training department, comprised of experienced managers, senior staff and veteran chefs, constantly assesses the company's staffing requirements and future talent needs, closing any training gaps.

While feedback on previous training serves as reference for formulating future training, a mystery shopper scheme is well in place to gauge effectiveness and identify areas that can be improved. "Every quarter, a representative from an external consultancy firm visits our restaurants regularly to evaluate our service, food and beverage and hygiene standards," Mr Chan expands. "Keeping an eye on competitors and industry trends also helps to benchmark service levels. This sort of information is vital to our training initiatives."

In a bid to further boost staff competence, the department started planning for a three-stage quality recognition programme last year. "We have launched a series of product knowledge training workshops and are working on the second stage of the programme, which will focus on language training," Kathy Hon, assistant training manager of the Spaghetti House says, noting that advanced training is also in the pipeline.

"Service alignment must begin on day one"

Adhering to the company's "promote from within" policy, the majority of the Spaghetti House's senior management including district managers and district chefs were promoted internally. Their extensive experience must be complimented by higher academic qualifications. "Some of our senior staff are studying management programmes to further develop their skills," Mr Chan says. The company supports such endeavours through subsidies and assists employees by arranging work shifts so that they can accommodate their studies.

Monthly store manager meetings keep staff abreast of trends and changes in the industry, while current issues, complaints and customer feedback are discussed at quarterly management meetings. The company also organises seminars and workshops for staff in an effort to broaden their horizons and keep them updated on industry best practice.

Competition brings out the best in staff, Ms Hon stresses. This year alone, the Spaghetti House has won a number of top accolades including the Hong Kong Retail Management Association's "Leader in the fast food/restaurant category — mystery shoppers programme" and the Hong Kong International Airport Authority's customer service excellence programme's "Best service award". The Spaghetti House was also runner-up in the airport environmental best practice competition, and won a "Group safety performance award" and a "Catering establishment award" from the Labour Department's catering industry safety award scheme.

"Staff who participate in industry competitions always come back with greater confidence and improved performance," Ms Hon concludes.

Salient points

- Service alignment starts from day one
- Experienced staff act as trainers
- Interactive training caters for young workforce
- "Promote from within" policy encourages ongoing learning

Taken from *Career Times* 3 May 2008, p. A20

Your comments are welcome at editor@careertimes.com.hk